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List 33

Frank Meadow Sutcliffe
1853 - 1941
Photographer of Whitby

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An Arts Council Photography Exhibition

The Esk and the old Whitby Bridge c. 1907

Introduction

This touring exhibition, the third in our series devoted to the work of major figures in the history of photography in England, again draws attention to the fact there are excellent collections of historical photographs outside London. Large numbers of Sutcliffe's glass negatives survive and are now owned by the Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society. The fine modern exhibition prints have been made from these negatives, by agreement with the Society, by Bill Eglon Shaw of the Sutcliffe Gallery, Whitby, who has done much to bring Sutcliffe's work to the attention of the public.

We are indebted to the Kodak Museum for the loan of the original Kodak 'snapshots' taken by Sutcliffe later in his life.

We also thank Michael Hiley who selected the final exhibition prints and was responsible for the preparation of this catalogue.

Norbert Lynton
Director of Exhibitions
Arts Council of Great Britain

Frank Meadow Sutcliffe 1853–1941
Photographer of Whitby

At the turn of the century, the small port and resort of Whitby on the Yorkshire coast was known as 'The Photographer's Mecca'. Amateur photographers made pilgrimages to photograph the busy harbour with its sailing-vessels and its fishing-fleet, manned by sturdy fishermen; the narrow alleyways, known locally as 'ghauts', which ran between the closely-packed cottages of the old town; and the Abbey ruins, high on the East Cliff, starkly silhouetted against the sky. The setting of Whitby at the mouth of the River Esk, where the cliffs rise up on either side to shelter the anchorage, is striking. Eskdale, running between moorland which isolates the valley physically and makes Whitby the natural focal point for the farming communities which it shelters, is unspoilt and very beautiful. But there are other strikingly situated fishing-ports in England and other beautiful dales. The reason why photographers came to Whitby was that they had already seen the beauties of the town and the surrounding countryside lovingly displayed in the internationally famous photographs of Frank Meadow Sutcliffe.

He was born in 1853 – just fourteen years after the discovery of photography had been revealed to an astonished public. In these early days it was by no means clear whether photography was akin to science or to art. Photographers found that they formed a completely new breed of image-maker; their skills seemed to lie midway between those of the painter and those of the chemist. There was no concensus of opinion as to either the rôle of the photographer, or the nature of the images which he produced. As photographic images are commonplace to modern eyes, it is necessary to make a mental adjustment in order to appreciate to the full the originality of such innovators in photography as Frank Sutcliffe. By the time that he died in 1941, motion pictures provided entertainment for millions, television was in the process of development, and anyone who could point a camera and press a button called themselves a photographer. It was during the 87 years spanned by his long life that photography began to find its own identity, and modern photography has built upon the firm foundations laid down by such master photographers as Frank Sutcliffe.

He was born in Leeds, the eldest son of Thomas Sutcliffe, a painter in watercolours, whose qualities of good humour, excited curiosity and infectious enthusiasm Frank inherited. Thomas encouraged his children to make full use of their talents – they produced their own illustrated storybooks on his printing press – and when Frank showed an interest in photography he cleared half the hayloft to make a darkroom and gave him a huge mahogany camera to work with. Frank's formal schooling was almost non-existent, but the stimulating company of his father whom he sometimes accompanied on painting expeditions in the Yorkshire countryside more than compensated for this. As a teenager he was already busy mastering the difficulties of the wet-plate process of photography, and taking photographs of his friends and neighbours.

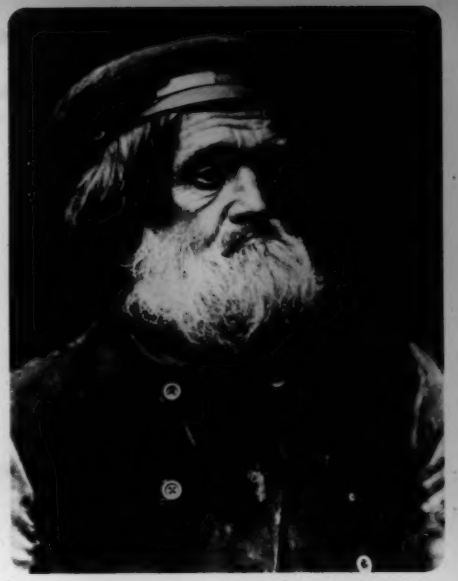
In 1870 the Sutcliffe family moved to Whitby where they had spent their summer holidays since Frank's childhood. The following year Thomas died of heart failure at the early age of 43, and Frank found himself as head of the family. He was 18 and, apart from a very unhappy period as a clerk in Tetley's brewery in Leeds, had no experience of making his way in the world. Before his death Thomas had suggested that Frank should take up photography as a profession, and it was now with a sense of urgency that Frank began to transform what had up to that time been for him a fascinating and totally absorbing pastime into a means of earning a living. His father's friends gave him commissions to take photographs for them in the Lake District, and Francis Frith, the head of a large photographic firm producing 'local views', employed him to take some of the North Riding. In 1873 he was invited to visit the art critic John Ruskin, who had seen and admired one of his photographs, and Sutcliffe took a series of photographs at Ruskin's residence, Brantwood.

However, to earn one's living as a photographer in the 1870s one had almost invariably to become a portrait photographer, and this meant setting up and equipping a studio. A disastrous error of judgement led Sutcliffe to build a studio for himself in Tunbridge Wells. This proved to be a total failure, and in 1876 Sutcliffe with his wife and child returned to Whitby. With what meagre resources he had left, he managed to rent part of a jet-worker's shop, where the jet was turned and polished, as his studio. It was situated up a smelly, back alley and became so hot on sunny days that sitters sometimes fainted. But it was a start, and Sutcliffe began to build up his business as a professional portrait photographer. Over the years many sitters braved the stairs and the heat to have their portraits taken by Sutcliffe in his tiny studio in Waterloo Yard. Much time was spent in photographing children and babies; other sitters ranged right across the social scale from the Archbishop of York to a local ploughman, proudly wearing his new boots for his visit to the photographer's. During the summer season, when Whitby came to life as an increasingly popular holiday resort, Sutcliffe used to work in his studio from early morning to late at night, when he went home and continued mounting the photographs he had taken into the early hours of the morning. But he soon realized that however hard he worked, he could not earn enough in the six weeks or so of the 'season' to carry him through the rest of the year, when local trade was only just enough to make it worth his while to keep the studio open. The spur of financial necessity was added to the pleasure of photographing his surroundings, and it was through 'a sort of reasoned desperation', as a friend later described it, that Sutcliffe began to take the photographs in and around Whitby which were to make him famous.

It is clear from Sutcliffe's writings that he did not regard Whitby as a place of exile to which a fickle fate had banished him. From time to time he visited photographer friends in London and on one occasion was offered a job in a Regent Street portrait studio which would have brought him much more in the way of financial rewards than his Whitby studio. But he was not to be tempted away from Whitby and Eskdale. He once described himself as a 'limpet' and said that a person who stuck fast in one place couldn't have a career. But he was not concerned with 'getting on' in the manner of a successful businessman, and turned aside from the race for worldly success to pour all his drive and creative energy into his photographs.

The long hours spent in the studio and darkroom in the course of his work as a portrait photographer might have robbed him of many opportunities to get out and about the harbourside and the fields with his camera, but the knowledge and skill which he acquired in his day-to-day work gave him a control over the development and printing of his photographs which can have been equalled by few other photographers. Because he had control over every stage of the photographic process, Sutcliffe was able to push the photographic equipment at his disposal to its limits and produced photographs which were outstanding technically, apart from any pictorial merits which they might have.

But a technically perfect image is not necessarily a good photograph, as Sutcliffe knew very well. His photographs are striking visual images which reveal his great skill as a photographer, but more important than any technical or pictorial expertise is the sense of deep affection



George 'Larry' Wilson

which reaches the spectator through the eye of the photographer and his camera. Sutcliffe delighted in and drew his strength from a love for the town of Whitby, for Eskdale and its inhabitants, and for the surrounding moorland. His photographs reveal a close personal attachment to his subject matter. He cared about the people he was photographing – the fishwives, the fishermen and their children, the farmworkers and even the tramps. Many of the figure studies which he took would have been impossible without the co-operation of, for example, the Whitby fishermen. They all knew Mr Sutcliffe and were happy to be photographed by him as they stood by the harbour rail. They are not merely photographic 'extras' included to give a whiff of the briny to a harbour scene. Every one of them retains his individuality, indeed, many of them can readily be identified by name, some appearing in several of Sutcliffe's photographs – 'Stumper' Dryden who had a wooden leg, the result of an accident when, as a boy, he had fallen over Tate Hill Pier, Robert Ledley, Joe Tomlinson who lived on the Cragg, Mr Coulson who was later drowned leaving a widow and five children, and many others. Sutcliffe's photographs of them are more than carefully but naturally arranged figure studies; they are more than documentary records of the Whitby harbourside at the end of the last century. One feels that Sutcliffe is photographing friends, who on many occasions put themselves

'Water Rats' 1886

out to suit his requests, even if they were just back from an exhausting fishing-trip. Because of his closeness to them, one can begin to feel something of the bond which held together this closely-knit fishing community. When a fisherman drowned, which was not uncommon, the community lost a son, a husband, a father, an uncle, and much more in one tragedy, as the families were interlinked by marriage. In his portrait of Henry Freeman, the sole survivor of the Whitby lifeboat disaster of 1861, Sutcliffe captures the strength and bravery of the fishermen, and his photograph of little 'Dandy' Storr sitting on the knee of his great-uncle Tom Storr emphasizes the continuity of the fishing community as their skills were passed from generation to generation. This sense of closeness is also evident in his photographs of the wives and daughters of the community, for example, Nan Pennock and Lizzie Hawksfield, and in those of the people of Eskdale, for example George Scarth the besom (broom) maker and his wife Ann.

There is a serenity in many of these photographs which is particularly attractive to an age such as our own in which change and stress have come to be accepted as normal. Sutcliffe's photographs celebrate a way of life and pace of living which hardly lasted past the turn of the century. Steam-powered fishing-boats transformed the fishing industry, the swish of the scythes of mowers in the hayfield was replaced by the clatter of machinery, and Whitby began to change increasingly rapidly. He believed that many of the changes which were taking place were adversely affecting the quality of the environment and, armed with specially taken lantern slides, gave lectures on the subject.

The years Sutcliffe lived in Whitby provided him with opportunities which escaped most other photographers. He could afford to wait his time and to take a subject under just the right conditions of light at exactly the right time of year. At the same time he was well aware that it was necessary for the photographer to exploit every opportunity presented to him and delighted in capturing the transitory effects of the weather – of fog, of rain, and of sunlight.

In 1894 he moved into a new photographic studio in Skinner Street, Whitby. His business as a portrait photographer was flourishing, and he found less and less time to spend on taking the photographs which by this time had brought him world-wide fame. His work had been exhibited in London in the first one-man show to be held by the Camera Club in 1888; the Prince of Wales had purchased a print of 'Water Rats' – probably Sutcliffe's most famous photograph – to hang in Marlborough House, and between 1881, when he won his first photographic award at an exhibition in Newcastle, and 1905, his photographs were honoured with sixty-two gold, silver and bronze medals at exhibitions in Britain and all over the world, from Chicago to Tokyo and from Paris to Calcutta. He had become a member of the progressive group of leading photographers who formed the Linked Ring in 1892. He now put a good deal of energy into magazine and newspaper articles on photography, in which he passed on some of his experience and skill to the rising generation of photographers, but his excitement with the images produced by photography continued unabated and in the years around the turn of the century he became absorbed in working with the new range of hand-held Kodak cameras.

When in 1922 he sold his photographic business, his retirement lasted just one week, at the end of which he became the curator of the museum of the Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society. Six years before he died in 1941 he was made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society. It was belated but deserved recognition of the talents of a photographer who set very high standards for himself and, by treating photography as a creative medium in its own right and not as a debased form of painting, produced some of the most striking and yet unpretentious photographs of the late nineteenth century.

Michael Hiley
January 1st, 1974

Barry Lane: Exhibition Organiser
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Booklist

The following books deal with Sutcliffe's place in the history of British photography:

'The History of Photography' by Helmut and Alison Gernsheim.
Thames and Hudson 1969, pp 456–462.
'Victorian Painters' by Jeremy Maas.
Barrie and Rockliff, The Cresset Press 1969, p 202.
'Views on Nudes' by Bill Jay.
Focal Press 1971, pp 24–26.
'Frank Sutcliffe: Photographer of Whitby' by Michael Hiley, Gordon Fraser 1974.

Articles on Sutcliffe

Sutcliffe of Whitby by Bill Eglon Shaw, 'Creative Camera' March 1968, pp 100–103.
The Frank M. Sutcliffe Memorial Lecture by J. L. Hankey, 'The Photographic Journal' August 1942, pp 280–291.
F. M. Sutcliffe of Whitby. An Appreciation and some Examples of his Work by W. J. Warren, 'The Amateur Photographer' 15 June 1900, pp 470–473.
Mr F. M. Sutcliffe by Charles Noel Armfield, 'Sun Artists' (edited by W. A. Boord) No. 8 July 1891, pp 55–60.

Sutcliffe wrote dozens of articles for various photographic journals around the turn of the century, 'The Amateur Photographer', 'Photography', and 'Camera Notes' among them – and contributed a column titled 'Photography Notes' to 'The Yorkshire Weekly Post' from 1908 to 1930. None of these articles has been reprinted in book form.

Exhibition and Print Design Lynn Yudell